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Jury in cocaine case didn't know accused's past

A Toronto jury that has started deliberations in a cocaine trafficking case was never told that one of the two accused is a convicted international "Ecstasy kingpin" whose life story a Hollywood-based filmmaker is trying to turn into a movie.

By **BETSY POWELL** Courts Bureau
Tues., Sept. 30, 2008

A Toronto jury that has started deliberations in a cocaine trafficking case was never told that one of the two accused is a convicted international "Ecstasy kingpin" whose life story a Hollywood-based filmmaker is trying to turn into a movie.

In 2001, Sean Erez, now 38, pleaded guilty to drug conspiracy in Brooklyn, N.Y., after admitting to running an ecstasy distribution network that used young Orthodox Jews to smuggle the "hug drug" out of Amsterdam and into the U.S.

Erez, who was born in Israel and had previous drug convictions, was sentenced to 15 years in a U.S. prison. In 2005, Ottawa approved his transfer to a Canadian facility and he was paroled shortly after in the summer of that year.

His notoriety is such that a quick search of Google turns up various accounts of the infamous scheme attributed to Erez, who conceived the idea figuring that customs officials would never suspect young Hasidic Jews serving as drug couriers.

"The recruiters believed that these couriers would not attract the attention of customs inspectors because of their conservative background and their religious dress and appearance," said a press release issued by the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York.

"The recruiters exploited the youth and relatively sheltered background of their recruits by falsely telling them that they would be smuggling diamonds."

According to the popular Internet Movie Database, Montreal-born moviemaker Ian Kessner is developing a number of projects including a feature called Glow, "based on the real life story of ecstasy kingpin Sean Erez."

The status of the project is unknown and Kessner could not be reached for comment. But Nataly Abitan, Erez's ex-girlfriend - and the Crown's key witness in the cocaine case - is listed as a "friend" on Kessner's Facebook page.

Erez's latest trouble with the law began on a visit to Toronto in the summer of 2006 when he was shot in the stomach and legs at the upscale Westin Harbour Castle hotel on the city's waterfront.

Police charged him and another man, Eugene Starchik, 26, of British Columbia, with possession of cocaine for the purpose of trafficking.

"The theory of the Crown is that this was a drug deal that went bad," Ontario Superior Court Justice Frances Kiteley told the jury summarizing some of the case.

Abitan, a manager at the National Bank in Montreal, was initially charged. Her charges were dropped after she agreed to testify for the Crown.

After the shooting, police found four kilograms of cocaine on the 28th floor, in a room where the ice machine is located. Down the corridor is Room 2816, which that Canada Day weekend was rented by Starchik and shared by Erez and Abitan. Abitan, 30, testified she came to Toronto with Erez for what she thought would be a fun time.

Instead, she spent a lot of the weekend on her own. On the night they were supposed to return to Montreal, Abitan testified that while alone in Room 2816 she saw a black Adidas bag in which there was a considerable quantity of cocaine.

Later, when she and Erez returned to the room, he was shot by intruders who Abitan described as young black men. Starchik was beaten and found in the parking lot with his hands cuffed behind his back.

Neither man testified during the trial.

Photographs entered as exhibits show the hotel room was ransacked. "Based on that evidence, can you reasonably draw an inference that the two black males had done that because they were looking for the cocaine?" the judge said to the jury before they retired.

Starchik, who represented himself, told the jury that Abitan's testimony is unreliable.

Evidence presented included a video showing a white male in the lobby carrying what appears to be an Adidas bag. Abitan identified that man as Starchik.

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